

ISLAM IN OUR TIMES

A Determined Moslem Moderate Emerges from the Shadows

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Before announcing the launching of his Islamic moderate political initiative which he calls “Wasatia” in March 2007, Professor Mohammed Dajani has lived in the shadows of his country’s politics, refraining from assuming any political position within the cadre of the Palestinian Authority. Between 1967 and 1975, he was an active Fatah leader calling for the destruction of Israel and the establishment of a Palestinian state on its rubbles. In 1975, he started his long journey in search for a homeland and identity that took him to England, the United States, Jordan, and eventually two decades later bringing him back to his final destination in Palestine, earning two doctorate degrees on the way and publishing numerous academic books and articles.

As a technical advisor to the Palestinian Authority and professor of political science at Al-Quds University, Dajani kept his distance from the corrupt and autocratic political system that emerged in Palestine in the wake of the Oslo peace process. But over the past few months, he crept into the light as his country moves closer and closer to civil war having been divided into two mini-states, a radical Islamic entity in Gaza led by Hamas moving in the sphere of Iran, and a secular entity in the West Bank led by Fatah and influenced by the United States.

Dismayed at the impact of Islamic radicalism on his society and the growing despair among his people, Dajani pushed toward establishing what he describes as an eagle of hope soaring the skies of Palestine with

one wing seeking political and religious moderation, while the other seeking to usher economic development and prosperity. His initiative called al-Wasatia, a term that literally means moderation, centrism, and mid-ground, and used in the Holy Quran to mean justice and balance, raises as its slogan a verse from *Surat al-Baqarat* (the Cow Surah, [And We have created you *Ummattan Wasattan*] a mid-ground nation). “This slogan is extremely powerful in mobilizing the religious masses,” Dajani asserts, “since this is verse 143 of the Cow Surat which contains 286 verses.”

As the new movement speeds from recognition to promise to hope, to delivery, it is perhaps natural that its critics pulled out their daggers. Al-Wasatia critics argue that it would be naive to believe that governments should adopt moderate policies since it is politically known that governments generally adopt policies that serve their best interests. Dajani does not yet have much to show for his eighteen months of activity in spite of all his efforts to get this initiative popularly recognized among the Palestinians. Attempts to register al-Wasatia as a charitable religious organization met with no success so far. Moreover, his efforts to convince the PA Minister of Education to include the moderate values of Wasatia as part of the school curriculum or to persuade the PA Minister of Religious Affairs to have mosque preachers trained on the Islamic middle-ground creed were met with deaf ears. Yet, a slim light of hope had emerged when some religious scholars and leaders took upon themselves to give lectures in universities, to preach in mosques, and to publish articles on Wasatia in the local press.

Wasatia aspires to unleash a surge of egalitarian and democratic passions that will bring the average man into the political arena. Dajani hopes that the coming year will hold more promise as an increasing number of people join his crusade. What may seem little or modest progress by the standards of his critics, counts as a big jump by his standards. A year ago, he argues, Wasatia as a term and a movement was unheard of, now it is on the table and has a political, economic, and social agenda.

His book, *Al-Wasatia, From Theory to Practice*, first published in January 2007, rests on one simple idea: the meaning of life is found in living in moderation—“this is the soul of all religions since the beginning.” The book presents mid-ground and centrism ideas as portrayed in the holy books as well as articulated by the various religious thinkers and politi-

cal philosophers. How does this square with the belief of radical Moslems that Islam is “religion of God”? Dajani highlights this contradiction with verses from the Holy Quran which asserts that the faithful would not be good believers until they profess full faith in God, His books, and His apostles with no reservation or distinction among them.

In his Wasatia office located in one of the most congested poor neighborhoods of Jerusalem, the soft-mannered Palestinian scholar appears fully convinced that his message of justice, balance, and moderation will one day reach not only Palestinians in the Occupied Territories but other Moslems around the world. The political turmoil fueled by Israel’s continued military occupation coupled with the economic deteriorating conditions led many Palestinians to abandon their traditional character of being moderate to espouse radicalism and suicide bombings. But Dajani hopes that the message of Wasatia would bring both Israeli and Palestinian public opinion closer to having more faith in negotiations and dialogue with each realizing that the cake need to be shared not trampled on.

What about the desired Palestinian state: will Wasatia advocate an Islamic caliphate or a secular political system that calls for the separation of state and religion similar to that of the United States? True to the call, Wasatia calls for a mid-course, Dajani asserts. It wants to follow the American tradition of protecting religion from the arbitrary power of the state, while at the same time, adheres to the European tradition of protecting the state from religious radicalism, conservatism, fanaticism, and fundamentalism. Here, Dajani maintains that the Palestinians neither share the American sense of deep distrust for government (nearly seven out of ten Americans believe that they cannot trust the government to do the right thing most of the time), nor the European sense of deep distrust of religion. In contrast, the Palestinians, Dajani argues, have trust in both state and religion and as such favor a formula of coexistence between them. For that end, Wasatia seeks to find a happy medium where the state has laws facilitating freedom of religion, and religion does not impose on the state its *shari’a* laws and restrictions as advocated by those with a radical religious bent. In a future state, Wasatia will work to strike a balance between the American constitutional democracy on the one hand, and the European parliamentary democracies on the other.

As promised, Dajani is striving to deliver a real departure from all other Palestinian Moslem religious parties and organizations. He calls for a balance between rationality and emotions to end the cycle of conflict and violence that marred the past. "When I question the right of Palestinian refugees to return to Israel, one of my intentions is to spare the younger generation the experience of growing up as Moslem minority in a Jewish state. Rather, I would like our children experience growing up as a majority in a Palestinian state. This would greatly enrich their lives," he asserts. His message to the people is simple, "Let's not let the heavy burdens of the past bury the promises of the future. Let's adhere by God's call for justice, tolerance, freedom of religion, acceptance of the other, that the next generation may live in peace and harmony."

Dajani maintains that the Palestinians must take the bitter pill that Israel as a Jewish state is "here to stay," on the other side, the Israelis must also take the bitter pill to make them understand that the creation of the Palestinian state is an essential need to fulfill the quest for Palestinian identity. "The longer the Israeli occupation continues and Palestinian demands remain unaddressed, the more the ground continues to remain fertile for radicalism and fanaticism. Both Israelis and Palestinians, known for being two intelligent people of learning and culture, must have realized those simple facts."

The question that remains to be seen: Will the Palestinian voters in the next elections use their electoral power to evict those in power and replace them with new leadership? For the sake of the Palestinian people let us hope so.